

EUPHEMISMS IN LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

1

The role of euphemisms in language comprehension: The taboo topic of rape

Research Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Research Distinction in Psychology in the Undergraduate

colleges of The Ohio State University

by

Ashley A. Neal

The Ohio State University

July 2015

Project Advisor: Dr. Nikole Patson-Huffman, Department of Psychology

Abstract

The present study examined effects of euphemisms on language comprehension. Participants (N=316) completed an online survey and were asked to read a scenario depicting rape and answer questions regarding their interpretations of the scenarios and their attitudes about the speaker. The scenarios varied only in the target word used (i.e., rape; sexual assault; forced himself), the placement of the target word (beginning of passage; end of passage), and the point of view of the speaker (victim; lawyer). No significant effects were found of the target word used or placement of the word on participants' responses. However, a significant effect of speaker was found on the dependent variables, with the victim point of view conditions eliciting higher ratings of the reliability, trustworthiness, and credibility of the speaker, and how strongly the speaker seemed to feel to participants than the lawyer point of view conditions. Language does not have as much of an influence on cognition as predicted, however, this study did provide evidence that who is reporting affects audiences' judgments.

The role of euphemisms in language comprehension: The taboo topic of rape.

Rape is a topic that is often avoided because it can cause considerable social and emotional strain in conversation and make both the speaker and listener uncomfortable. Many solutions have come about to solve this problem, such as referring to rape with a euphemism in order to make it less uncomfortable and crude to speak about. Because of this tendency for societal correctness, an individual's actual definition of what constitutes rape may be somewhat unclear. This uncertainty may lead to many situations in which a crime such as rape goes unrecognized and unpunished. The effects of language as a contributing factor to this issue will be studied. Euphemisms will be considered as a possible direct link to the distortion of common perceptions about rape today.

Defining Rape

The legal definition of rape as described by the United States Department of Justice in 2012 is as follows: "The penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim." This definition includes non-forcible situations, specifying that a lack of force does not mean consent, and also includes situations in which the victim is unable to give consent due to youth or temporary or permanent mental or physical handicaps, including instances in which the victim is under the influence of alcohol or other substances. Sexual assault is any type of unwanted sexual contact or behavior, and although rape is often described with the term "sexual assault" an important distinction to make between the two is that rape is an instance that falls under the broader category of sexual assault, as defined by the US Department of Justice.

The task of defining what is considered by the general population as a rape is a difficult one. Many people's views differ based on various factors such as age, sex, and their own past

experiences with rape, which are likely influenced by popular media like television or music.

Rape myths are the traditional views of rape (Burt, 1980). Such views reflect the gender roles of past generations, including men being the bread winner and women being the homemaker, that have been passed down and learned through reinforcement of stereotypical gender roles at home or from the media. These views include a woman who is out by herself or at a party or is scantily dressed and/or drinking in a way “asking for it” or wants to be taken advantage of sexually by exposing herself and putting herself in those situations. Rape myth acceptance is the belief in those traditional views. It is closely tied to the belief in a just world (e.g., Burt, 1980), or the belief that individuals typically get what they deserve.

Because rape has a clear legal definition, individuals responsible for the enforcement of laws should be able to correctly recognize a situation as rape. However, Campbell and Johnson (1997) provided evidence that that is not the case. When surveying police officers on their own definitions of rape, they found that only a fraction of them (19% of the sample) had a view that was consistent with then-current legal definitions. Over half of the officers still held traditional or stereotypical beliefs of rape that characterized their definitions. For example, this included beliefs such as the victim was teasing the assailant, thus deserved to be raped, or the assailant really needed it and should be excused. If the victim of the crime and the law enforcement expected to investigate the report are both unaware that the situation is indeed a rape, reporting it would be useless.

Stereotypical beliefs about gender roles and rape are among many factors that contribute to acceptance of rape myths. Such stereotypes include believing that men are naturally dominant and it is normal for them to take what they want, while women should be submissive to men. Burt (1980) studied these potential factors and found that sex role stereotyping, distrust of the

opposite sex, and acceptance of interpersonal violence significantly predicted belief in rape myths among adult men and women. She highlights the considerable effect our cultural beliefs have on our personal beliefs, including those portrayed in the media glamorizing violence and encouraging exploitation of the opposite sex.

Burt and Albin (1981) took this issue further by testing whether acceptance of rape myths affected an individual's definition of rape. Using vignettes especially produced to avoid the incorporation of rape myths (such as women who wear tight clothing are asking for trouble or the majority of rape victims are women with reputations of being promiscuous), participants were given different rape scenarios to read and interpret according to their beliefs, and were asked to rate whether or not it was a rape and how strongly they feel they would convict the attacker. Participants were also given several attitude measures to determine their level of rape myth acceptance. The results showed that those individuals with a higher acceptance of rape myths also demonstrated a limited definition of rape in their responses of how likely it was that the scenarios they were given were rape. This limited definition serves to exclude many situations that are legally considered rape, and leads individuals to believe rape is something that happens very rarely. Because people believe that rape is rare, and these other situations happen frequently, but do not fit their narrow definition of rape, they do not accept that these situations are actually rape. This study is important in highlighting that the seriousness of the situations that are legally defined as rape is being diluted by the idea that those situations are common.

Anderson (1999) studied the effects of rape myth acceptance on how blame was attributed to both female and male rape survivors. She found that more blame was attributed to the behavior of the survivors, such as being out alone late at night, regardless of their gender, rather than to their character, such as "being stupid" or naive. Her results also showed that

participants assigned significantly more blame to female survivors than male survivors. Although this effect was seen in female participants, it was considerably more significant in male participants' assessment of the scenarios. This stark contrast hints at a defensive reaction to the female rape scenario as compared to the male rape, and suggests men may have higher rape myth acceptance than women, as supported by previous studies mentioned. These findings were supported by a more recent study (Deming, Krassen Covan, Swan, & Billings, 2013) that examined how interpretations of rape scenarios varied within a peer group setting, among groups of female college freshmen and seniors. The study's results implied that many actual instances of rape are viewed as common occurrences in the participants' minds. This is especially true for situations involving alcohol or a previous relationship between the victim and assailant, similar to the results of Burt and Albin. Because they are common and rape is not (according to common rape myths), those instances are not believed to actually be rape and are therefore not reported to law enforcement (Deming et. al., 2013). This is further evidence that rape myth acceptance has a direct effect on the perception of what is considered rape, by allowing an individual to imagine the event as something other than rape.

Language as a Cause

A significant factor in the opinions of rape is the way in which we discuss it. Language is our primary mode of communication, and it is the way we learn about the world around us. Our perception of something can be influenced by the language that is used by others around us to describe it. We learn about the world directly through experiences but language can shape how we interpret those experiences. Because of this direct connection, language plays a significant role in how we interpret and rationalize events and actions.

One way our interpretation of an event can be shaped and altered is through manipulating the role of the agent of the sentence through the use of active voice versus passive voice. The agent of the sentence is the subject doing the action. Using passive voice, also known as non-agentive, the action of the sentence is performed *upon* the subject, rather than *by* it (e.g. the tree was hit by the car, rather than the car hit the tree). This is important in the interpretation of an event because it can alter to what degree we attribute responsibility. This happens because although we understand that there was an impact between a car and a tree, the car was removed from being the acting agent in the sentence, lessening the responsibility of the car for hitting the tree. Fausey and Boroditsky (2010) supported this claim with their study on the effect of agentive versus non-agentive verb forms in the judgment of blame and financial responsibility. They found that use of non-agentive verb forms (i.e., passive voice) resulted in study participants attributing less guilt to the actor of an event compared to agentive verb forms (i.e., active voice). This supports the notion that using language that does not acknowledge the assailant as the acting agent of the event influences individuals into attributing to him or her less blame and responsibility. These results were supported by Bohner (2001), who investigated this tendency within the context of rape. He found that after watching rape scenes from movies, those participants who chose to write about the event in a passive voice tended to attribute more responsibility to the victim and less to the assailant compared to those who chose to employ an active voice. The results from this study also showed that those participants who wrote about the event with a passive voice also exhibited greater rape myth acceptance. This correlation highlights the tendency for individuals who have a restricted definition of what constitutes a rape (little or no alcohol involved, no previous relationship between the victim and assailant, victim out alone, etc.) to employ various means to distance themselves from the uncomfortable topic or

situation, including using language tools such as passive voice to describe it. This is reflected in the passive-voice participants' higher attributions of responsibility onto the victims, and less responsibility onto the assailants.

Similarly, Lakoff and Johnson (1987) argued that men engage in the use of metaphor to shift the blame onto the victim, much like using passive voice. This rationalizes their desire to use physical force in the pursuit of a woman. Beneke's *Men on Rape* (1982) was a book describing the views and opinions regular men held about rape. Analyzing a passage from this book, Lakoff and Johnson claim that men go through a process of taking the metaphor that a woman's appearance affects a man, and turn it into the belief that the woman is intentionally exerting a physical force over that man. Following this rationale, it is conceivable to imagine the justification of rape as a type of revenge, and that their physical force to take advantage of the woman is paying back her metaphorical force making that man want her and making him try to turn off his feelings to not want her. When taken from this perspective, it is quite alarming how easily the use of language can distort the ethics of an action to make it seem reasonable and almost justified. This play on language makes the woman out to be as much, or more accurately, *more* to blame for the resulting action than the assailant.

In these situations, when the agency is manipulated and blame is shifted to the victim, the seriousness of the event is lessened. Because of this, there is no need for punishing the assailant as the victim, who is allegedly to blame, has already been punished.

Euphemism

Euphemisms are a language tool frequently used in everyday conversation, and, like passive voice and metaphors, they may also affect the interpretation the listener creates for an event. They are intended to represent the basic meaning of the replaced word or phrase, retaining

the syntax and semantics of the sentence, while changing the emotional nuances with a less emotionally charged word (Jay, 2009). However, in doing so, they may lead the listener into drawing a different meaning from the sentence than what the speaker was trying to convey.

An infamous example of euphemisms in action is the Penn State sexual abuse scandal (Lucas & Fyke, 2014). Jerry Sandusky was sentenced to 30-60 years in prison for sexually abusing numerous young boys for over 15 years. One aspect that was shocking to the public about this crime, however, was the nature of the communication about his crimes up the chain of command and the inaction that resulted from the language that was used. In the analysis done on the actual language used by those involved in the event, they found a strong tendency at each level of reporting to exclude some uncomfortable detail or part of the description that was present in the previous level of reporting. An example of this is Michael McQueary, who originally witnessed Sandusky with a young boy in the locker room, reporting to Head Coach Joe Paterno that he saw Sandusky “horsing around” with a young male and that it was very inappropriate. Paterno then reported the incident to his superiors as Sandusky having a minor in the locker rooms when they were not allowed in that particular campus building. This tendency highlights the strong motivation towards the utilization of language and euphemisms on behalf of the speaker to cover up the taboo nature of the situation, which in turn made it easier for the listeners to assume something less than rape actually occurred and avoid dealing with the true nature of the situation.

One way euphemisms may influence interpretations of a rape event is by forcing comprehenders to make a scalar implicature. Scalar implicatures arise when words that can be viewed along a scale, including expressions that may have a stronger substitute, force listeners to make the inference that the speaker had a reason for not using the stronger term. Grodner, Klein,

and Tanenhaus (2014) argued that when listeners are presented with a weaker expression rather than the stronger alternative, such as *some* rather than *all*, they make a scalar inference and immediately assume *not all*. However, *some* is not logically incompatible with *all* (e.g., if I have all of the balls, I still have some of the balls). They had participants listen to instructions containing either *some*, *all*, or *none* (e.g., “click on the girl who has some of the balls”), and click on the picture that matched the instructions. The pictures were of six cartoon figures, three male and three female, that had distributed among them an assortment of objects (e.g., balloons, balls), and cartoons of the same gender would either have all of the items of one sort (e.g., all of the balls), some but not all of the items of one sort (e.g., two of the four balloons), or no items at all. They measured their eye movements to see how quickly they fixated on the correct picture, and found that participants immediately looked at the target picture after hearing the implicature; upon hearing *some* they immediately looked at the picture of the character holding some but not all of the items of one sort, rather than waiting until they heard the identification of the object. This provides evidence that participants instantly assumed that *some* meant *not all* (Grodner et al., 2014). This “not-all” interpretation may lead individuals presented with a euphemism to assume that if an actual rape occurred and the person reporting meant “rape” then they would have said “rape” instead of the more polite alternative. In doing so, speakers force listeners to make inferences about the event. This explanation lines up with reports analyzed by Lucas and Fyke in the Penn State scandal (Lucas & Fyke, 2014).

The phenomenon of excluding uncomfortable details at each level of reporting is explained by Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) as ethical fading. They discuss how in some instances, the individual being deceived by the use of euphemisms may actually be the speaker. We do this by replacing socially undesirable actions with abstract and dispassionate words,

reconstructing the behavior in our mind into something more or less justifiable (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). This self-deception dulls the ethical implications of an action, letting an individual pursue their own self-interests and do or allow something they would normally consider wrong, all without the knowledge they are engaging in self-deception. This ethical fading can be seen in action in the Penn State case in the eager acceptance of the vague reports by the higher ups in the organization, such as university president Graham Spanier, so they could avoid the negative publicity that would surely result from appropriately punishing Sandusky. Rather than pushing for more information or reasons for why it was being reported, university leaders simply accepted what was being told to them without extensive questioning (Lucas & Fyke, 2014). The most notable phrase that occurred frequently in this investigation to replace the uncomfortable *rape* was *horsing around*, a euphemism so far removed from the act of sexually assaulting a young boy that it allowed for an interpretation that was not rape at all, but also resulted in the inaction of the superiors to prevent it from happening again.

An alternative theory for the use of euphemisms in language is presented by McGlone, Beck, and Pfister (2006). They suggest euphemisms may be used by the speaker to convey a positive self-representation of respect, credibility, and maturity. They argue euphemisms can eventually become a synonym for the term it replaces, contaminated with the negative connotation originally meant to be avoided. Claiming these euphemisms are replaced after being continually associated with the literal word, they studied the effect of using an unfamiliar euphemism contrasted with a conventional one, and found that the more conventional euphemism was perceived as more polite compared to the unfamiliar euphemism. This suggests that the replacement of euphemisms is not due to contamination as they thought, but may instead reflect the evolution of the concept in question and change as our views and knowledge of that

topic change, such as sexual assault or post-traumatic stress disorder. Like the distinct relationship between the terms rape and sexual assault, post-traumatic stress disorder has also evolved from terms like shell shock and battle fatigue. Although these three expressions are similar, they refer to distinct concepts of which our knowledge has evolved considerably over the years. Although this may be indeed be indicative of the evolution of euphemisms, it also shows that some euphemisms nonetheless become increasingly disconnected from the concept they were originally meant to represent, allowing for much room in regards to their interpretation. This “room” is what contributes to the widespread divide between what is actually and legally considered rape and what the general public considers rape.

In the present study, the effect of using euphemisms to replace the word *rape* on the interpretations of a rape scenario was examined. By replacing *rape* with these euphemisms, talking about a rape event can be made less socially strained. However, it can also act much like passive voice in removing the urgency of the word from the actual event, lessening the seriousness of the crime and the likelihood that proper action will be taken in response. It may even allow the blame to shift from the assailant to the victim in a crime, raising the question of consent, as suggested by the results of Fausey and Boroditsky (2010). Despite the lack of empirical research on the effects of using euphemisms in language, there is a breadth of literature detailing the difficulties of defining and identifying a rape situation and the possible contributors to this challenge. It is hypothesized that replacing *rape* with a syntactically similar euphemism will change the semantics of the scenario and alter the interpretation regarding whether or not a rape occurred. The effect of who is recounting the event will also be observed, to see whether the perception of the rape scenario is affected by the victim speaking or a lawyer, with the expectation that the more authoritative and credible source (the lawyer) will result in increased

perceptions of a rape occurring (Erickson, Lind, Johnson, & O'Barr, 1978). The final language variable being observed is the placement of the target word. It is hypothesized that by starting off the vignette with the target word, readers will interpret the rest of the passage as supporting detail to that word (e.g., Kintsch, 1988). This would, in theory, eliciting a stronger conviction that a rape occurred, as opposed to encountering the target word at the end of the scenario after the event has already been described. The point of view of the speaker is also manipulated (victim vs. lawyer) to determine if there are any effects on credibility and trustworthiness that might influence participants' opinions on whether the scenario is a rape and their willingness to convict the assailant.

Method

Participants

Participants (N=362) were taken from Mturk, an online survey database. 46 participants did not complete the survey and were excluded from the analysis. Of the remaining participants (N=316), 182 were male, 134 were female, 251 classified themselves as white or Caucasian, 22 as Hispanic or Latino, 20 as Asian/Pacific Islander, 18 as black or African American, 3 as Native American or American Indian, and 2 as other. The age range of the participants was 19 to 68 years of age. Participants received \$0.75 for their participation.

Design

The study was a 2 x 2 x 3 factorial design, examining the differences between placement of the target word (at the beginning of the passage vs. at the end), the speaker of the passage (victim vs. lawyer), and the target word (rape vs. sexual assault vs. forced himself on me).

Stimuli

Participants read one of the twelve scenarios about a rape situation that varied on the target word used (rape, sexual assault, or forced himself on me), the placement of the target word (beginning or end of passage), and the point of view of the speaker (victim or lawyer). All of the surveys were active at the same time, participants chose which survey to complete, but all of the surveys had the same instructions. Participants only received credit for responding to one survey. The mean number of participants per condition was 26.3; each condition had at least 25 participants. After reading the passages, participants were then asked to answer questions based on their attitudes about the speaker and on the likelihood a rape occurred. The scenarios are provided in Appendix A. Participants were asked to rate the likelihood a rape occurred and the probability of conviction on a 7-point scale ranging from very unlikely (1) to very likely (7) to assess to what extent they interpret the situation as rape. They rated speaker reliability on a 7-point scale from very unreliable (1) to very reliable (7), speaker trustworthiness on a 7-point scale from very untrustworthy (1) to very trustworthy (7), and speaker credibility on a 7-point scale from very uncredible (1) to very credible (7). These questions were used to determine if any differences existed between the use of victim point of view and lawyer point of view. Finally, they rated how strongly and passionately the speaker seemed to feel to them on 7-point scales, ranging from not at all strongly (1) to very strongly (7) and very impassioned (1) to very passionate (7), to determine how the use of the euphemism versus the literal word might affect how the participants feel about the speaker.

Procedure

Before choosing to participate, participants were given the description that they would answer a survey about language, and given the warning that the survey may contain adult content. Participants were first given instructions to read the following scenario carefully and

answer the questions following it. They were then asked to rate the likelihood a rape occurred and the probability of conviction, the reliability, trustworthiness, and credibility of the speaker, and how strongly and passionately the speaker seemed to them. Once they completed, they were debriefed about the specific nature of the study and thanked for their participation.

Predictions

We predicted that reading the word “rape” would influence participants to rate the likelihood that a rape occurred and the probability of conviction higher than reading the euphemisms “sexually assaulted” and “forced himself” because they would take those words to mean that something less than a rape occurred. Placing the target word at the beginning of the passage would influence participants to rate how strongly and how passionately the speaker seemed higher than placing it at the end of the passage. Reading the passage from the lawyer’s point of view would influence participants to rate speaker credibility, trustworthiness, and reliability higher than reading it from the victim’s point of view.

Results

One response was missing from the data; the rest of the participants’ responses were included in the analysis. The dependent variables examined in the results were: the likelihood a rape occurred, the probability of conviction, the reliability of the speaker, the trustworthiness of the speaker, the credibility of the speaker, how strongly the speaker seemed to feel, and how passionately the speaker seemed to feel. The analysis examined the mean differences of the participants’ judgments of the scenarios based on the target word used in the scenarios, the placement of the target word, and the point of view of the speaker. The means of the analysis describe the average ratings of the dependent variables in each of the twelve conditions (see Table 1 for means). A between-subjects univariate analysis of variance was conducted for each

dependent variable. The results revealed no significant effects of the target word or the placement of the target word within the passage on the dependent variables ($p > .05$).

Significance was found in the effect of speaker on participants' judgments on the likelihood a rape occurred, $F(1, 304) = 6.681, p = .01$, the reliability of the speaker, $F(1, 304) = 7.772, p < .01$, the trustworthiness of the speaker, $F(1, 304) = 8.014, p < .01$, the credibility of the speaker, $F(1, 304) = 8.821, p < .01$, and how strongly the speaker seemed to feel to them, $F(1, 304) = 7.006, p < .01$. All effects showed higher ratings in the victim point of view conditions, with the exception of the dependent variable of the likelihood a rape occurred, which showed higher ratings in the lawyer point of view conditions.

Discussion

The goal of the current study was to investigate the effects of euphemisms on the comprehension of a rape scenario. The variables manipulated in this experiment were the label used to describe the rape, the placement of the target word, and the point of view of the speaker. It was predicted that using the label "rape" would elicit higher ratings of the dependent variables than the euphemisms "sexual assault" and "forced himself," that placing the target word at the beginning of the passage would elicit higher ratings than placing it at the end, and that reading the scenario from a lawyer point of view would elicit higher ratings than from the victim point of view. The analysis showed no significant effects of target word choice or placement on the dependent variables. There were significant effects of the point of view of the speaker on the likelihood a rape occurred, the reliability, trustworthiness, and credibility of the speaker, and how strongly the speaker seemed to participants. The conditions in which the victim was speaking elicited higher ratings of all of the dependent variables except the likelihood a rape occurred.

Past literature has given evidence to support the theory of linguistic relativity, or the notion that language influences cognition (e.g., Fausey & Boroditsky, 2010). This study, as influenced by that theory, aimed to determine if the use of euphemism had an influence on thought or perception. It was predicted that euphemisms may trigger a scalar implicature. In theory, this would allow individuals to more easily accept the euphemism conditions as a situation lesser than an actual rape. Because the euphemism conditions did not explicitly state that a rape occurred, the target word may have been taken as being on a scale and given the conclusion that because a stronger term was available and was not used, that stronger word (i.e. “rape”) does not apply. However, this hypothesis was not supported by the results from this experiment, as no effects of euphemisms were shown on participants’ interpretation of the rape scenarios, showing only effects of speaker point of view on the dependent variables.

One possible reason the euphemisms did not trigger a scalar implicature may be due to the design of our scenarios and the questions that followed. The original interpretation may have changed after being asked the pointed questions about rape immediately after reading the scenarios, regardless of the effects of the euphemisms. By directly asking about rape immediately following the scenario, the responses of the participants may have been influenced by the assumption that that situation had to have been a rape. If so, this calls for more subtlety in the scenarios and questions, making them more ambiguous and allowing participants to draw their own conclusions without being guided or directly influenced by the questions.

The language used did not influence participants’ judgments, but rather their judgments and the context may have influenced how they understood the meaning of the language. Because a relationship was not found between the euphemism used and the interpretations of the scenarios, these results may give support to the suggestion offered by McGlone et. al (2006).

Euphemisms may simply be a reflection of the current understanding of a subject while retaining a synonymous meaning with other euphemisms. According to this idea, the euphemisms evolve as the knowledge about the subject evolves. Consider the word “rape” and its euphemism “sexual assault”. Although the two are not exactly interchangeable, sexual assault is a broader category under which rape falls and is understood by people to be a polite way of getting across the same meaning. This would go towards explaining the lack of differences between the label conditions.

We also predicted that manipulating the speaker point of view between a lawyer and a victim would show differences in the ratings of the dependent variables favoring the lawyer. Our expectation was that the more authoritative and credible source (the lawyer) would result in increased perceptions of a rape occurring. The results showed no support for that hypothesis, showing higher ratings of the reliability, trustworthiness, and credibility of the speaker, and how strongly the speaker seemed to participants in the victim point of view, as compared to the lawyer point of view that only elicited higher ratings of the likelihood a rape occurred.

Exploring the past literature highlighted three avenues of reasoning that could explain why the victim point of view elicited the significantly higher ratings of the dependent variables than did the lawyer point of view. The language we employed in our scenarios may have had an influence on those differences. Powerless speech style is distinguished by markers such as hedges, intensifiers, grammar that is too formal, questioning forms, etc. (Erickson, Lind, Johnson, & O’Barr, 1978). Speakers of this style are perceived as “powerless,” or individuals with low social power or status. Speech that lacks these markers often signifies confidence and credibility. Hosman and Wright (2009) tested this idea to determine if hedges and hesitations would influence perceptions of the speaker and guilt in a simulated court case. They found that

the absence of hesitations led to higher ratings of speaker character, whereas their presence led to higher ratings of guilt, as did the presence of hedges. They also found an interaction of the absence of hedges and the absence of hesitations that led to the highest ratings of authoritativeness. These findings give evidence that powerless speech markers do have a negative influence on perceptions of a speaker. The scenarios used in our experiment contained none of the typical speech markers of the powerless style, but instead was a straightforward description of the event. This “powerful” way of illustrating the event may have led participants to perceive the victim as more credible, and confident in her message.

There are also characteristics of the victim and her situation that may have encouraged higher ratings of credibility and trustworthiness. Lui and Standing (1989) found that when presented with a tape recorded message about the AIDS virus that was depicted as being from either a doctor, a priest, or an unidentified citizen, nuns rated the message from the priest as being significantly more credible than from the lawyer and the citizen. Their study suggested that the trustworthiness of the communicator had more influence on credibility than the actual expertise of the communicator. This could suggest that participants in this current study, like the nuns, attributed the victim as more trustworthy than the lawyer, therefore making her more credible. This could be due to a number of reasons, including her actually experiencing it, or being in a common situation doing everyday things that many of our participants may have experienced in their own lives and relate to. This indirect similarity to the victim through relating to her via their own past experiences, as argued by McGarry and Hendrick (1974), may have played a considerable role in the more favorable judgments of the victim as compared to the lawyer. In McGarry and Hendrick’s study, they examined the effects of social similarity on persuasion and perceived credibility, comparing townie (dissimilar) speakers and student

(similar) speakers giving a speech regarding student voting rights to students. They found that student speakers were perceived as being more honest, sincere, expert, and overall more credible than townie speakers. This similarity of our participants to our victim, by being a regular citizen in a potentially common situation, falls in line with our hypothesis that the credibility of our victim was perceived as higher than the lawyer's because she is more similar to the participants, and therefore more trustworthy.

Our final consideration is that of the victim's actual behavior. As discussed in the introduction, acceptance of rape myths leads individuals to be more reluctant when labeling a situation as rape, especially in cases where the victim was engaged in high risk behaviors such as drinking, going out alone, or wearing revealing clothing (Sperry & Siegel, 2013). In the scenarios designed for the present study, the victim was not engaged in any behaviors that would trigger rape myth beliefs. She had gone out with friends, was with a man she had been dating for awhile, and was not under the influence when she was raped. Because our victim was not deviating from the behaviors designated as "acceptable," and was still subjected to the crime of rape, participants may have rated speaker traits as higher than they would have if she had engaged in those high risk behaviors. This feature of the scenario may also offer up another explanation as to why no effects of language were found in the results. If she had been engaged in those high risk behaviors, then those participants with high rape myth acceptance may have more easily interpreted the conditions using euphemisms instead of the word "rape" as a situation lesser than rape. If that had occurred, then effects of language would have been present in the results.

Limitations

Limitations that could potentially be addressed in future studies include the method by which participants were obtained. Although the use of an online survey database allowed for a large, well-rounded sample of participants, it did not allow for a controlled study, free of distractions and external variables influencing their responses. Possible moderators that could be studied within this context include sexism, feminism, gender, and age. Also, while the current study was designed to examine the effect of using euphemisms on language comprehension, we looked at one euphemism in one context, so we do not have the ability to generalize these findings to a trend that applies to all euphemisms. To do so, a broader study examining several forms of euphemisms in various contexts would be necessary. Despite these limitations, this study adds much to the existing knowledge about euphemisms, showing they do not have as direct an influence on cognition as we predicted.

References

- Anderson, I. (1999). Characterological and behavioral blame in conversations about female and male rape. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 18*, 377-394.
- Bohner, G. (2001). Writing about rape: Use of the passive voice and other distancing text features as an expression of perceived responsibility of the victim. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 40*, 515-529.
- Burt, M., & Albin, R. (1981). Rape myths, rape definitions, and probability of conviction. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 11*, 212-230.
- Burt, M. (1980). Cultural myths and supports for rape. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 38*, 217-230.
- Campbell, R., & Johnson, C. (1997). Police officers' perceptions of rape: Is there consistency between state law and individual beliefs? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 12*, 255-274.
- Deming, M., Krassen Covan, E., Swan, S., & Billings, D. (2013). Exploring rape myths, gendered norms, group processing, and the social context of rape among college women: A qualitative analysis. *Violence Against Women, 19*, 465-485.
- Erickson, B., Lind, E. A., Johnson, B., & O'Barr, W. (1978). Speech style and impression formation in a court setting: The effects of "powerful" and "powerless" speech. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 14*, 266-279.
- Fausey, C., & Boroditsky, L. (2010). Subtle linguistic cues influence perceived blame and financial liability. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review, 17*, 644-650.
- Grodner, D., Klein, N., & Tanenhaus, M. (2010). "Some," and possibly all, scalar inferences are not delayed: Evidence for immediate pragmatic enrichment. *Cognition, 116*, 42-55.
- Hosman, L., & Wright, J. (1987). The effects of hedges and hesitations on impression formation

- in a simulated courtroom context. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 51, 173-188.
- Jacobi, L. (2014). Perceptions of profanity: How race, gender, and expletive choice affect perceived offensiveness. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 16, 261-276.
- Jay, T. (2009). The utility and ubiquity of taboo words. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 4, 153-161.
- Kintsch, W. (1988). The role of knowledge in discourse comprehension: A construction-integration model. *Psychological Review*, 95, 163-182.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1987). The metaphorical logic of rape. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*, 2, 73-79.
- Lucas, K. & Fyke, J. (2014). Euphemisms and ethics: A language-centered analysis of penn state's sexual abuse scandal. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 122, 551-569.
- Lui, L., & Standing, L. (1989). Communicator credibility: Trustworthiness defeats expertness. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 17, 219-221.
- McGarry, J., & Hendrick, C. (1974). Communicator credibility and persuasion. *Memory & Cognition*, 2, 82-86.
- McGlone, M., Beck, G., & Pfister, A. (2006). Contamination and camouflage in euphemisms. *Communication Monographs*, 73, 261-282.
- Sperry, K., & Siegel, J. (2013). Victim responsibility, credibility, and verdict in a simulated rape case: Application of Weiner's attribution model. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 18, 16-29.
- Tenbrunsel, A., & Messick, D. (2004). Ethical fading: The role of self-deception in unethical behavior. *Social Justice Research*, 17, 223-236.

Table 1. Means (standard deviation) of Analysis.

	Victim		Lawyer	
	Beginning	End	Beginning	End
Likelihood of Rape	6.2143 (1.25778)	6.2308 (.99228)	6.8000 (.40825)	6.6000 (.70711)
Sexual Assault	6.1538 (1.22286)	6.7407 (.52569)	6.5600 (.76811)	6.5517 (.57235)
Forced Himself	6.3200 (.85245)	6.2143 (1.25778)	6.6538 (.68948)	6.3077 (1.12318)
Probability of Conviction				
Rape	4.6071 (1.16553)	5.1923 (1.20064)	4.6400 (1.38082)	4.8800 (1.48099)
Sexual Assault	5.0769 (1.54721)	5.1481 (1.29210)	4.8400 (1.77200)	4.9655 (1.34915)
Forced Himself	4.2800 (1.69607)	4.6071 (1.16553)	5.1154 (1.24344)	4.5000 (1.70294)
Reliability of Speaker				
Rape	5.8214 (1.05597)	5.6923 (1.15825)	5.3200 (1.24900)	5.4800 (1.19443)
Sexual Assault	5.3846 (1.47179)	5.8889 (1.08604)	5.1600 (1.17898)	4.9655 (1.14900)
Forced Himself	5.6000 (1.35401)	5.7857 (1.06657)	5.7308 (1.07917)	5.3077 (.97033)
Trustworthiness of Speaker				
Rape	5.8571 (1.00791)	5.6154 (1.23538)	5.6000 (1.11803)	5.2800 (1.17331)
Sexual Assault	5.6154 (1.13409)	5.6667 (1.14354)	5.2400 (1.09087)	5.0690 (1.16285)
Forced Himself	5.5600 (1.41657)	5.8571 (1.00791)	5.3462 (1.41258)	5.4000 (1.04083)
Credibility of Speaker				
Rape	5.8214 (1.05597)	5.6923 (1.25759)	5.4800 (1.22882)	5.4000 (1.11803)
Sexual Assault	5.6154 (1.23538)	5.8519 (1.23113)	5.2000 (1.19024)	5.1724 (1.13606)
Forced Himself	5.6800 (1.37598)	5.8214 (1.05597)	5.5769 (1.02657)	5.3077 (1.08699)
Strength of Speaker				
Rape	5.4286 (1.16837)	5.3462 (1.41258)	5.0400 (1.48549)	5.2800 (.97980)
Sexual Assault	5.2692 (1.73338)	5.7037 (1.10296)	5.0000 (1.32288)	5.1379 (1.30176)
Forced Himself	5.4000 (1.52753)	5.4286 (1.16837)	5.1923 (1.16685)	4.5769 (1.23849)
Passion Speaker				
Rape	4.7143 (1.30120)	4.6145 (1.72225)	4.2800 (1.40000)	4.6800 (1.02956)
Sexual Assault	4.5000 (1.55563)	5.0741 (1.29870)	4.2400 (1.42244)	4.8621 (1.45710)
Forced Himself	5.0400 (1.36870)	4.7143 (1.30120)	4.9231 (1.09263)	3.8846 (1.45126)

Appendix A**Scenarios****Victim, Beginning of Passage**

Rob and I had been dating for a few months before he (raped / sexually assaulted / forced himself on) me. That night we had gone out to see a new movie with some friends of ours and Rob was walking me home after. I was feeling really happy as we walked holding hands and laughing about the movie. It was cold outside so I asked him to come in to warm up before he went home. We went in and as he sat down in the living room I got us a couple glasses of wine. I sat down with him and after a couple minutes we started kissing. He kept pulling at my clothes and I tried telling him no, but he said I was just being a tease and he knew that I wanted it too. I said no again, telling him I wasn't ready and trying to pull away but he's a lot stronger than me and held me down. He kept kissing me and took the rest of my clothes off and did it.

Victim, End of Passage

Rob and I had been dating for a few months before it happened. That night we had gone out to see a new movie with some friends of ours and Rob was walking me home after. I was feeling really happy as we walked holding hands and laughing about the movie. It was cold outside so I asked him to come in to warm up before he went home. We went in and as he sat down in the living room I got us a couple glasses of wine. I sat down with him and after a couple minutes we started kissing. He kept pulling at my clothes and I tried telling him no, but he said I was just being a tease and he knew that I wanted it too. I said no again, telling him I wasn't ready and trying to pull away but he's a lot stronger than me and held me down. He kept kissing me and took the rest of my clothes off and (raped / sexually assaulted / forced himself on) me.

Lawyer, Beginning of Passage

Rob and Jenna had been dating for a few months before he (raped / sexually assaulted / forced himself on) her. That night they had gone out to see a new movie with some friends of theirs and Rob was walking her home after. She was feeling really happy as they walked holding hands and laughing about the movie. It was cold outside so Jenna asked him to come in to warm up before he went home. They went in and as Rob sat down in the living room she got them a couple glasses of wine. Jenna sat down with him and after a couple minutes they started kissing. He kept pulling at her clothes and she tried telling him no, but he said she was just being a tease and he knew that she wanted it too. Jenna said no again, telling him she wasn't ready and trying to pull away but he's a lot stronger than her and held her down. He kept kissing her and took the rest of her clothes off and did it.

Lawyer, End of Passage

Rob and Jenna had been dating for a few months before it happened. That night they had gone out to see a new movie with some friends of theirs and Rob was walking her home after. She was feeling really happy as they walked holding hands and laughing about the movie. It was cold outside so Jenna asked him to come in to warm up before he went home. They went in and as Rob sat down in the living room she got them a couple glasses of wine. Jenna sat down with him and after a couple minutes they started kissing. He kept pulling at her clothes and she tried telling him no, but he said she was just being a tease and he knew that she wanted it too. Jenna said no again, telling him she wasn't ready and trying to pull away but he's a lot stronger than her and held her down. He kept kissing her and took the rest of her clothes off and (raped / sexually assaulted / forced himself on) her.